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Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America

ON A SPRING EVENING IN MAY 1834, A SMALL GROUP OF WOMEN MET AT THE revivalistic Third Presbyterian Church in New York City to found the New York Female Moral Reform Society. The Society's goals were ambitious indeed; it hoped to convert New York's prostitutes to evangelical Protestantism and close forever the city's numerous brothels. This bold attack on prostitution was only one part of the Society's program. These self-assertive women hoped as well to confront that larger and more fundamental abuse, the double standard, and the male sexual license it condoned. Too many men, the Society defiantly asserted in its statement of goals, were aggressive destroyers of female innocence and happiness. No man was above suspicion. Women's only safety lay in a militant effort to reform American sexual mores—and, as we shall see, to reform sexual mores meant in practice to control man's sexual values and autonomy. The rhetoric of the Society's spokesmen consistently betrayed an unmistakable and deeply felt resentment toward a male-dominated society.¹

¹"Minutes of the Meeting of the Ladies' Society for the Observance of the Seventh Commandment held in Chatham Street Chapel, May 12, 1834," and "Constitution of the New York Female Moral Reform Society," both in ledger book entitled "Constitution and Minutes of the New York Female Moral Reform Society, May, 1834 to July 1839," deposited in the archives of the American Female Guardian Society (hereinafter referred to as A.F.G.S.), Woodycrest Avenue, Bronx, New York. (The Society possesses the executive committee minutes from May 1835–June 1847, and from Jan. 7, 1852–Feb. 18, 1852.) For a more detailed institutional history of the Society see Carroll Smith Rosenberg, *Religion and*

Few if any members of the Society were reformed prostitutes or the victims of rape or seduction. Most came from middle-class native American backgrounds and lived quietly respectable lives as pious wives and mothers. What needs explaining is the emotional logic which underlay the Society's militant and controversial program of sexual reform. I would like to suggest that both its reform program and the anti-male sentiments it served to express reflect a neglected area of stress in mid-19th century America—that is, the nature of the role to be assumed by the middle-class American woman.

American society from the 1830s to the 1860s was marked by advances in political democracy, by a rapid increase in economic, social and geographic mobility, and by uncompromising and morally relentless reform movements. Though many aspects of Jacksonianism have been subjected to historical investigation, the possibly stressful effects of such structural change upon family and sex roles have not. The following pages constitute an attempt to glean some understanding of women and women's role in antebellum America through an analysis of a self-consciously female voluntary association dedicated to the eradication of sexual immorality.

Women in Jacksonian America had few rights and little power. Their role in society was passive and sharply limited. Women were, in general, denied formal education above the minimum required by a literate early industrial society. The female brain and nervous system, male physicians and educators agreed, were inadequate to sustained intellectual effort. They were denied the vote in a society which placed a high value upon political participation; political activity might corrupt their pure feminine nature. All professional roles (with the exception of primary school education) were closed to women. Even so traditional a female role as midwife was undermined as male physicians began to establish professional control over obstetrics. Most economic alternatives to marriage (except such burdensome and menial tasks as those of seamstress or domestic) were closed to women. Their property rights were still restricted and females were generally considered to be the legal wards either of the state or of their nearest male relative. In the event of divorce, the mother lost custody of her children—even when the husband was conceded to be the erring party.² Women's universe was bounded by their homes and the

the Rise of the American City (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971), chaps. 4 and 7. The New York Female Moral Reform Society changed its name to American Female Guardian Society in 1849. The Society continues today, helping children from broken homes. Its present name is Woodycrest Youth Service.

²For a well-balanced though brief discussion of American women's role in antebellum America see Eleanor Flexner, *A Century of Struggle* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), chaps. 1–4.

career of father or husband; within the home it was woman's duty to be submissive and patient.

Yet this was a period when change was considered a self-evident good, and when nothing was believed impossible to a determined free will, be it the conquest of a continent, the reform of society or the eternal salvation of all mankind. The contrast between these generally accepted ideals and expectations and the real possibilities available to American women could not have been more sharply drawn. It is not implausible to assume that at least a minority of American women would find ways to manifest a discontent with their comparatively passive and constricted social role.

Only a few women in antebellum America were able, however, to openly criticize their socially defined sexual identity. A handful, like Fanny Wright, devoted themselves to overtly subversive criticism of the social order.³ A scarcely more numerous group became pioneers in women's education. Others such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony founded the women's rights movement. But most respectable women—even those with a sense of ill-defined grievance—were unable to explicitly defy traditional sex-role prescriptions.

I would like to suggest that many such women channeled frustration, anger and a compensatory sense of superior righteousness into the reform movements of the first half of the 19th century; and in the controversial moral reform crusade such motivations seem particularly apparent. While unassailable within the absolute categories of a pervasive evangelical world-view, the Female Moral Reform Society's crusade against illicit sexuality permitted an expression of anti-male sentiments. And the Society's "final solution"—the right to control the mores of men—provided a logical emotional redress for those feelings of passivity which we have suggested. It should not be surprising that between 1830 and 1860 a significant number of militant women joined a crusade to establish their right to define—and limit—man's sexual behavior.

Yet adultery and prostitution were unaccustomed objects of reform even in the enthusiastic and millennial America of the 1830s. The mere discussion of these taboo subjects shocked most Americans; to undertake such a crusade implied no ordinary degree of commitment. The founders of the Female Moral Reform Society, however, were able to find both

³There are two modern biographies of Fanny Wright, both rather thin: W. R. Waterman, *Frances Wright* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press., 1924); Alice J. Perkins, *Frances Wright, Free Enquirer* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1939). Fanny Wright was one of the first women in America to speak about women's rights before large audiences of both men and women. Yet she attracted very few women into the woman's rights movement, probably because her economic and political views and her emphatic rejection of Christianity seemed too radical to most American women.

legitimization for the expression of grievance normally unspoken and an impulse to activism in the moral categories of evangelical piety. Both pious activism and sex-role anxieties shaped the early years of the Female Moral Reform Society. This conjunction of motives was hardly accidental.

The lady founders of the Moral Reform Society and their new organization represented an extreme wing of that movement within American Protestantism known as the Second Great Awakening. These women were intensely pious Christians, convinced that an era of millennial perfection awaited human effort. In this fervent generation, such deeply felt millennial possibilities made social action a moral imperative. Like many of the abolitionists, Jacksonian crusaders against sexual transgression were dedicated activists, compelled to attack sin wherever it existed and in whatever form it assumed—even the unmentionable sin of illicit sexuality.

New Yorkers' first awareness of the moral reform crusade came in the spring of 1832 when the New York Magdalen Society (an organization which sought to reform prostitutes) issued its first annual report. Written by John McDowall, their missionary and agent, the report stated unhesitatingly that 10,000 prostitutes lived and worked in New York City. Not only sailors and other transients, but men from the city's most respected families, were regular brothel patrons. Lewdness and impurity tainted all sectors of New York society. True Christians, the report concluded, must wage a thoroughgoing crusade against violators of the Seventh Commandment.⁴

The report shocked and irritated respectable New Yorkers—not only by its tone of righteous indignation and implied criticism of the city's old and established families. The report, it seemed clear to many New Yorkers, was obscene, its author a mere seeker after notoriety.⁵ Hostility quickly spread from McDowall to the Society itself; its members were verbally abused and threatened with ostracism. The society disbanded.

A few of the women, however, would not retreat. Working quietly, they

⁴John R. McDowall, *Magdalen Report*, rpr. *McDowall's Journal*, 2 (May 1834), 33–38. For the history of the New York Magdalen Society see *First Annual Report of the Executive Committee of the New York Magdalen Society, Instituted January 1, 1830*. See as well, Rosenberg, *Religion*, chap. 4.

⁵Flora L. Northrup, *The Record of a Century* (New York: American Female Guardian Soc., 1934), pp. 13–14; cf. *McDowall's Defence*, 1, No. 1 (July 1836), 3; *The Trial of the Reverend John Robert McDowall by the Third Presbytery of New York in February, March, and April, 1836* (New York, 1836). [Thomas Hastings Sr.], *Missionary Labors through a Series of Years among Fallen Women by the New-York Magdalen Society* (New York: N.Y. Magdalen Soc., 1870), p. 15.

began to found church-affiliated female moral reform societies. Within a year, they had created a number of such groups, connected for the most part with the city's more evangelical congregations. These pious women hoped to reform prostitutes, but more immediately to warn other God-fearing Christians of the pervasiveness of sexual sin and the need to oppose it. Prostitution was after all only one of many offenses against the Seventh Commandment; adultery, lewd thoughts and language, and bawdy literature were equally sinful in the eyes of God. These women at the same time continued unofficially to support their former missionary, John McDowall, using his newly established moral reform newspaper to advance their cause not only in the city, but throughout New York State.⁶

After more than a year of such discreet crusading, the women active in the moral reform cause felt sufficiently numerous and confident to organize a second city-wide moral reform society, and renew their efforts to reform the city's prostitutes. On the evening of May 12, 1834, they met at the Third Presbyterian Church to found the New York Female Moral Reform Society.⁷

Nearly four years of opposition and controversy had hardened the women's ardor into a militant determination. They proposed through their organization to extirpate sexual license and the double standard from American society. A forthright list of resolves announced their organization:

Resolved, That immediate and vigorous efforts should be made to create a public sentiment in respect to this sin; and also in respect to the duty of parents, church members and ministers on the subject, which shall be in stricter accordance with . . . the word of God.

Resolved, That the licentious man is no less guilty than his victim, and ought, therefore, to be excluded from all virtuous female society.

Resolved, That it is the imperious duty of ladies everywhere, and of every religious denomination, to co-operate in the great work of moral reform.

A sense of urgency and spiritual absolutism marked this organizational meeting, and indeed all of the Society's official statements for years to come. "It is the duty of the virtuous to use every consistent moral means to save our country from utter destruction," the women warned. "The sin of

⁶Northrup, *Record of a Century*, pp. 14-15; only two volumes of *McDowall's Journal* were published, covering the period Jan. 1833 to Dec. 1834. Between the demise of the New York Magdalen Society and the organization of the New York Female Moral Reform Society (hereinafter, N.Y.F.M.R.S.), McDowall was connected, as agent, with a third society, the New York Female Benevolent Society, which he had helped found in February of 1833. For a more detailed account see Carroll S. Rosenberg, "Evangelicalism and the New City," Ph.D. Diss. Columbia University, 1968, chap. 5.

⁷*McDowall's Journal*, 2 (Jan. 1834), 6-7.

licentiousness has made fearful havoc . . . drowning souls in perdition and exposing us to the vengeance of a holy God." Americans hopeful of witnessing the promised millennium could delay no longer.⁸

The motivating zeal which allowed the rejection of age-old proprieties and defied the criticism of pulpit and press was no casual and fashionable enthusiasm. Only an extraordinary set of legitimating values could have justified such commitment. And this was indeed the case. The women moral reformers acted in the conscious conviction that God imperiously commanded their work. As they explained soon after organizing their society: "As Christians we must view it in the light of God's word—we must enter into His feelings on the subject—engage in its overthrow just in the manner he would have us. . . . We must look away from all worldly opinions or influences, for they are perverted and wrong; and individually act only as in the presence of God."⁹ Though the Society's pious activism had deep roots in the evangelicalism of the Second Great Awakening, the immediate impetus for the founding of the Moral Reform Society came from the revivals Charles G. Finney conducted in New York City between the summer of 1829 and the spring of 1834.¹⁰

Charles Finney, reformer, revivalist and perfectionist theologian from western New York State, remains a pivotal figure in the history of American Protestantism. The four years Finney spent in New York had a profound influence on the city's churches and reform movements, and upon the consciences generally of the thousands of New Yorkers who crowded his revival meetings and flocked to his churches. Finney insisted that his disciples end any compromise with sin or human injustice. Souls were lost and sin prevailed, Finney urged, because men chose to sin—because they chose not to work in God's vineyard converting souls and reforming sinners.¹¹ Inspired by Finney's sermons, thousands of New Yorkers turned to

⁸"Minutes of the Meeting of the Ladies' Society for the Observance of the Seventh Commandment . . . May 12, 1834," and "Preamble," "Constitution of the New York Female Moral Reform Society."

⁹*Advocate of Moral Reform* (hereinafter, *Advocate*) 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1835), 6. The *Advocate* was the Society's official journal.

¹⁰Close ties connected the N.Y.F.M.R.S. with the Finney wing of American Protestantism. Finney's wife was the Society's first president. The Society's second president, Mrs. William Green, was the wife of one of Finney's closest supporters. The Society's clerical support in New York City came from Finney's disciples. Their chief financial advisers and initial sponsors were Arthur and Lewis Tappan, New York merchants who were also Charles Finney's chief financial supporters. For a list of early "male advisers" to the N.Y.F.M.R.S. see Joshua Leavitt, *Memoir and Select Remains of the Late Reverend John R. McDowall* (New York: Joshua Leavitt, Lord, 1838), pp. 248, also pp. 99, 151, 192. See as well L. Nelson Nichols and Allen Knight Chalmers, *History of the Broadway Tabernacle of New York City* (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor, 1940), pp. 49–67, and William G. McLoughlin Jr., *Modern Revivalism* (New York: Ronald Press, 1959), pp. 50–53.

¹¹For an excellent modern analysis of Finney's theology and his place in American Prot-

missionary work; they distributed Bibles and tracts to the irreligious, established Sunday schools and sent ministers to the frontier.¹² A smaller, more zealous number espoused abolition as well, determined, like Garrison, never to be silent and to be heard. An even smaller number of the most zealous and determined turned—as we have seen—to moral reform.¹³

The program adopted by the Female Moral Reform Society in the spring of 1834 embraced two quite different, though to the Society's founders quite consistent, modes of attack. One was absolutist and millennial, an attempt to convert all of America to perfect moral purity. Concretely the New York women hoped to create a militant nationwide women's organization to fight the double standard and indeed any form of licentiousness—beginning of course in their own homes and neighborhoods. Only an organization of women, they contended, could be trusted with so sensitive and yet monumental a task. At the same time, the Society sponsored a paralled and somewhat more pragmatic attempt to convert and reform New York City's prostitutes. Though strikingly dissimilar in method and geographic scope, both efforts were unified by an uncompromising millennial zeal and by a strident hostility to the licentious and predatory male.

The Society began its renewed drive against prostitution in the fall of 1834 when the executive committee appointed John McDowall their missionary to New York's prostitutes and hired two young men to assist him.¹⁴ The Society's three missionaries visited the female wards of the almshouse, the city hospital and jails, leading prayer meetings, distributing Bibles and tracts. A greater proportion of their time, however, was spent in a more controversial manner, systematically visiting—or, to be more accurate, descending upon—brothels, praying with and exhorting both the inmates and their patrons. The missionaries were especially fond of arriving early Sunday morning—catching women and customers as they

estantism see McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*. McLoughlin has as well edited Finney's series of New York Revivals which were first published in 1835. Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960). McLoughlin's introduction is excellent.

¹²Rosenberg, *Religion*, chaps. 2 and 3.

¹³These reforms were by no means mutually exclusive. Indeed there was a logical and emotional interrelation between evangelical Protestantism and its missionary aspects and such formally secular reforms as peace, abolition and temperance. The interrelation is demonstrated in the lives of such reformers as the Tappan brothers, the Grimké sisters, Theodore Dwight Weld, Charles Finney and in the overlapping membership of the many religious and "secular" reform societies of the Jacksonian period. On the other hand, the overlap was not absolute, some reformers rejecting evangelical Protestantism, others pietism, or another of the period's reforms.

¹⁴*Advocate*, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1835), 4; Northrup, *Record*, p. 19.

awoke on the traditionally sacred day. The missionaries would announce their arrival by a vigorous reading of Bible passages, followed by prayer and hymns. At other times they would station themselves across the street from known brothels to observe and note the identity of customers. They soon found their simple presence had an important deterring effect, many men, with doggedly innocent expressions, pausing momentarily and then hastily walking past. Closed coaches, they also reported, were observed to circle suspiciously for upwards of an hour until, the missionary remaining, they drove away.¹⁵

The Female Moral Reform Society did not depend completely on paid missionaries for the success of such pious harassment. The Society's executive committee, accompanied by like-thinking male volunteers, regularly visited the city's hapless brothels. (The executive committee minutes for January 1835, for example, contain a lengthy discussion of the properly discreet makeup of groups for such "active visiting.")¹⁶ The members went primarily to pray and to exert moral influence. They were not unaware, however, of the financially disruptive effect that frequent visits of large groups of praying Christians would have.¹⁷ The executive committee also aided the concerned parents (usually rural) of runaway daughters who, they feared, might have drifted to the city and been forced into prostitution. Members visited brothels asking for information about such girls; one pious volunteer even pretended to be delivering laundry in order to gain admittance to a brothel suspected of hiding such a runaway.¹⁸

In conjunction with their visiting, the Moral Reform Society opened a House of Reception, a would-be refuge for prostitutes seeking to reform. The Society's managers and missionaries felt that if the prostitute could be convinced of her sin, and then offered both a place of retreat and an economic alternative to prostitution, reform would surely follow. Thus they envisioned their home as a "house of industry" where the errant ones would be taught new trades and prepared for useful jobs—while being instructed in morality and religion. When the managers felt their repentant charges prepared to return to society, they attempted to find them jobs with Christian families—and, so far as possible, away from the city's temptations.¹⁹

Despite their efforts, however, few prostitutes reformed; fewer still appeared, to their benefactresses, to have experienced the saving grace of

¹⁵*Advocate*, 1 (Mar. 1835), 11–12; 1 (Nov. 1835), 86; N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, June 6, 1835 and April 30, 1836." These pious visitors received their most polite receptions at the more expensive houses, while the girls and customers of lower-class, slum brothels met them almost uniformly with curses and threats.

¹⁶N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, Jan. 24, 1835."

¹⁷*Advocate*, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1835), 7.

¹⁸For a description of one such incident see *Advocate*, 4 (Jan. 15, 1838), 15.

¹⁹*Advocate*, 1 (Sept. 1, 1835), 72; Northrup, *Record*, p. 19.

conversion. Indeed, the number of inmates at the Society's House of Reception was always small. In March 1835, for instance, the executive committee reported only fourteen women at the House. A year later, total admissions had reached but thirty—only four of whom were considered saved.²⁰ The final debacle came that summer when the regular manager of the House left the city because of poor health. In his absence, the executive committee reported unhappily, the inmates seized control, and discipline and morality deteriorated precipitously. The managers reassembled in the fall to find their home in chaos. Bitterly discouraged, they dismissed the few remaining unruly inmates and closed the building.²¹

The moral rehabilitation of New York's streetwalkers was but one aspect of the Society's attack upon immorality. The founders of the Female Moral Reform Society saw as their principal objective the creation of a woman's crusade to combat sexual license generally and the double standard particularly. American women would no longer willingly tolerate that traditional—and role-defining—masculine ethos which allotted respect to the hearty drinker and the sexual athlete. This age-old code of masculinity was as obviously related to man's social preeminence as it was contrary to society's explicitly avowed norms of purity and domesticity. The subterranean mores of the American male must be confronted, exposed and rooted out.

The principal weapon of the Society in this crusade was its weekly, *The Advocate of Moral Reform*. In the fall of 1834, when the Society hired John McDowall as its agent, it voted as well to purchase his journal and transform it into a national women's paper with an exclusively female staff. Within three years, the *Advocate* grew into one of the nation's most widely read evangelical papers, boasting 16,500 subscribers. By the late 1830s the Society's managers pointed to this publication as their most important activity.²²

Two themes dominated virtually every issue of the *Advocate* from its founding in January 1835, until the early 1850s. The first was an angry and emphatic insistence upon the lascivious and predatory nature of the American male. Men were the initiators in virtually every case of adultery or fornication—and the source, therefore, of that widespread immorality which endangered America's spiritual life and delayed the promised

²⁰*Advocate*, 1 (Mar. 1835), 11; N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, Apr. 5, 1836, May 30, 1835."

²¹N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, Oct. 4, 1836."

²²N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, June 6 and June 25, 1835, June (n.d.), 1836"; N.Y.F.M.R.S., *The Guardian or Fourth Annual Report of the New York Female Moral Reform Society presented May 9, 1838*, pp. 4-6.

millennium. A second major theme in the *Advocate's* editorials and letters was a call for the creation of a national union of women. Through their collective action such a united group of women might ultimately control the behavior of adult males and of the members' own children, particularly their sons.

The founders and supporters of the Female Moral Reform Society entertained several primary assumptions concerning the nature of human sexuality. Perhaps most central was the conviction that women felt little sexual desire; they were in almost every instance induced to violate the Seventh Commandment by lascivious men who craftily manipulated not their sensuality, but rather the female's trusting and affectionate nature. A woman acted out of romantic love, not carnal desire; she was innocent and defenseless, gentle and passive.²³ "The worst crime alleged against [the fallen woman] in the outset," the *Advocate's* editors explained, "is . . . 'She is without discretion.' She is open-hearted, sincere, and affectionate. . . . She trusts the vows of the faithless. She commits her all into the hands of the deceiver."²⁴

The male lecher, on the other hand, was a creature controlled by base sexual drives which he neither could nor would control. He was, the *Advocate's* editors bitterly complained, powerful and decisive; unwilling (possibly unable) to curb his own willfulness, he callously used it to coerce the more passive and submissive female. This was an age of rhetorical expansiveness, and the *Advocate's* editors and correspondents felt little constraint in their delineation of the dominant and aggressive male. "Reckless," "bold," "mad," "drenched in sin" were terms used commonly to describe erring males; they "robbed," "ruined" and "rioted." But one term above all others seemed most fit to describe the lecher—"The Destroyer."²⁵

A deep sense of anger and frustration characterized the *Advocate's* discussion of such all-conquering males, a theme reiterated again and again in the letters sent to the paper by rural sympathizers. Women saw themselves with few defenses against the determined male; his will was far stronger than that of woman.²⁶ Such letters often expressed a bitterness

²³"Budding," "lovely," "fresh," "joyous," "unsuspecting lamb," were frequent terms used to describe innocent women before their seduction. The *Advocate* contained innumerable letters and editorials on this theme. See, for example, *Advocate*, 4 (Jan. 1, 1838), 1; *Advocate*, 10 (Mar. 1, 1844), 34; *Advocate and Guardian* (the Society changed the name of its journal in 1847), 16 (Jan. 1, 1850), 3.

²⁴Letter in *Advocate*, 1 (Apr. 1835), 19.

²⁵"Murderer of Virtue" was another favorite and pithy phrase. For a sample of such references see: *Advocate*, 4 (Feb. 1, 1838), 17, *Advocate*, 10 (Jan. 1, 1844), 19–20; *Advocate*, 10 (Jan. 15, 1844), 29; *Advocate*, 10 (Mar. 1, 1844), 33.

²⁶*Advocate*, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1835), 3; *Advocate*, 1 (Apr. 1835), 19; *Advocate and Guardian*, 16 (Jan. 1, 1850), 3.

which seems directed not only against the specific seducer, but toward all American men. One representative rural subscriber complained, for example: "Honorable men; they would not plunder; . . . an imputation on their honour might cost a man his life's blood. And yet they are so passingly mean, so utterly contemptible, as basely and treacherously to contrive . . . the destruction of happiness, peace, morality, and all that is endearing in social life; they plunge into degradation, misery, and ruin, those whom they profess to love. O let them not be trusted. Their 'tender mercies are cruel.'"²⁷

The double standard seemed thus particularly unjust; it came to symbolize and embody for the Society and its rural sympathizers the callous indifference—indeed at times almost sadistic pleasure—a male-dominated society took in the misfortune of a passive and defenseless woman. The respectable harshly denied her their friendship; even parents might reject her. Often only the brothel offered food and shelter. But what of her seducer? Conventional wisdom found it easy to condone his greater sin: men will be men and right-thinking women must not inquire into such questionable matters.²⁸

But it was just such matters, the Society contended, to which women must address themselves. They must enforce God's commandments despite hostility and censure. "Public opinion must be operated upon," the executive committee decided in the winter of 1835, "by endeavoring to bring the virtuous to treat the guilty of both sexes alike, and exercise toward them the same feeling." "Why should a female be trodden under foot," the executive committee's minutes questioned plaintively, "and spurned from society and driven from a parent's roof, if she but fall into sin—while common consent allows the male to habituate himself to this vice, and treats him as not guilty. Has God made a distinction in regard to the two sexes in this respect?"²⁹ The guilty woman too should be condemned, the Moral Reform Society's quarterly meeting resolved in 1838: "But let not the most guilty of the two—the deliberate destroyer of female innocence—be afforded even an 'apron of fig leaves' to conceal the blackness of his crimes."³⁰

Women must unite in a holy crusade against such sinners. The Society called upon pious women throughout the country to shun all social contact with men suspected of improper behavior—even if that behavior con-

²⁷Letter in *McDowall's Journal*, 2 (Apr. 1834), 26–27.

²⁸Many subscribers wrote to the *Advocate* complaining of the injustice of the double standard. See, for example: *Advocate*, 1 (Apr. 1835), 22; *Advocate*, 1 (Dec. 1835), 91; *Advocate and Guardian*, 16 (Jan. 1, 1850), 5.

²⁹*Advocate*, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1835), 6–7.

³⁰Resolution passed at the Quarterly Meeting of the N.Y.F.M.R.S., Jan. 1838, printed in *Advocate*, 4 (Jan. 15, 1838), 14.

sisted only of reading improper books or singing indelicate songs. Church-going women of every village and town must organize local campaigns to outlaw such men from society and hold them up to public judgment.³¹ "Admit him not to your house," the executive committee urged, "hold no converse with him, warn others of him, permit not your friends to have fellowship with him, mark him as an evildoer, stamp him as a villain and exclaim, 'Behold the Seducer.'" The power of ostracism could become an effective weapon in the defense of morality.³²

A key tactic in this campaign of public exposure was the Society's willingness to publish the names of men suspected of sexual immorality. The *Advocate's* editors announced in their first issue that they intended to pursue this policy, first begun by John McDowall in his *Journal*.³³ "We think it proper," they stated defiantly, "even to expose names, for the same reason that the names of thieves and robbers are published, that the public may know them and govern themselves accordingly. We mean to let the licentious know, that if they are not ashamed of their debasing vice, we will not be ashamed to expose them. . . . It is a justice which we owe each other."³⁴ Their readers responded enthusiastically to this invitation. Letters from rural subscribers poured into the *Advocate*, recounting specific instances of seduction in their towns and warning readers to avoid the men described. The editors dutifully set them in type and printed them.³⁵

Within New York City itself the executive committee of the Society actively investigated charges of seduction and immorality. A particular target of their watchfulness was the city's employment agencies—or information offices as they were then called; these were frequently fronts for the white-slave trade. The *Advocate* printed the names and addresses of suspicious agencies, warning women seeking employment to avoid them at all costs.³⁶ Prostitutes whom the Society's missionaries visited in brothels, in prison or in the city hospital were urged to report the names of men who had first seduced them and also of their later customers; they could then be published in the *Advocate*.³⁷ The executive committee undertook as well

³¹This was one of the more important functions of the auxiliaries, and their members uniformly pledged themselves to ostracize all offending males. For an example of such pledges see *Advocate*, 4 (Jan. 15, 1838), 16.

³²*Advocate and Guardian*, 16 (Jan. 1, 1850), 3.

³³McDowall urged his rural subscribers to report any instances of seduction. He dutifully printed all the details, referring to the accused man by initials, but otherwise giving the names of towns, counties and dates. Male response was on occasion bitter.

³⁴*Advocate*, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1835), 2.

³⁵Throughout the 1830s virtually every issue of the *Advocate* contained such letters. The *Advocate* continued to publish them throughout the 1840s.

³⁶For detailed discussions of particular employment agencies and the decision to print their names see: N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, Feb. 12, 1845, July 8, 1846."

³⁷N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, Mar. 1, 1838, Mar. 15, 1838"; *Advocate*, 4 (Jan. 15, 1838), 15.

a lobbying campaign in Albany to secure the passage of a statute making seduction a crime for the male participant.³⁸ While awaiting the passage of this measure, the executive committee encouraged and aided victims of seduction (or where appropriate their parents or employers) to sue their seducers on the grounds of loss of services.³⁹

Ostracism, exposure and statutory enactment offered immediate, if unfortunately partial, solutions to the problem of male licentiousness. But for the seduced and ruined victim such vengeance came too late. The tactic of preference, women moral reformers agreed, was to educate children, especially young male children, to a literal adherence to the Seventh Commandment. This was a mother's task. American mothers, the *Advocate's* editors repeated endlessly, must educate their sons to reject the double standard. No child was too young, no efforts too diligent in this crucial aspect of socialization.⁴⁰ The true foundations of such a successful effort lay in an early and highly pietistic religious education and in the inculcation of a related imperative—the son's absolute and unquestioned obedience to his mother's will. "Obedience, entire and unquestioned, must be secured, or all is lost." The mother must devote herself whole-heartedly to this task for self-will in a child was an ever-recurring evil.⁴¹ "Let us watch over them continually. . . . Let us . . . teach them when they go out and when they come in—when they lie down, and when they rise up. . . ."⁴² A son must learn to confide in his mother instinctively; no thought should be hidden from her.

Explicit education in the Seventh Commandment itself should begin quite early for bitter experience had shown that no child was too young for such sensual temptation.⁴³ As her son grew older, his mother was urged to instill in him a love for the quiet of domesticity, a repugnance for the unnatural excitements of the theater and tavern. He should be taught to prefer home and the companionship of pious women to the temptations of bachelor life.⁴⁴ The final step in a young man's moral education would

³⁸The Society appears to have begun its lobbying crusade in 1838. N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, Oct. 24, 1838, Jan. 4, 1842, Feb. 18, 1842, Apr. 25, 1844, Jan. 8, 1845"; American Female Moral Reform Society (the Society adopted this name in 1839), *Tenth Annual Report for . . . 1844*, pp. 9–11; American Female Moral Reform Soc., *Fourteenth Annual Report for . . . 1848*.

³⁹The N.Y.F.M.R.S.'s Executive Committee Minutes for the years 1837, 1838, 1843 and 1844 especially are filled with instances of the committee instituting suits against seducers for damages in the case of loss of services.

⁴⁰*Advocate*, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1835), 6–7; 4 (Jan. 1, 1838), 1.

⁴¹*Advocate*, 10 (Feb. 1, 1844), 17–18; *Advocate and Guardian*, 16 (Jan. 1, 1850), 3–4.

⁴²*Advocate*, 10 (Jan. 1, 1844), 7–8.

⁴³*Advocate*, 2 (Jan. 1836), 3; *Advocate*, 4 (Jan. 15, 1838), 13.

⁴⁴*Advocate*, 4 (Jan. 1, 1838), 1–2; *Advocate*, 10 (Feb. 15, 1844), 26; *Advocate and Guardian*, 16 (Jan. 15, 1850), 15.

come one evening shortly before he was to leave home for the first time. That night, the *Advocate* advised its readers, the mother must spend a long earnest time at his bedside (ordinarily in the dark to hide her natural blushes) discussing the importance of maintaining his sexual purity and the temptations he would inevitably face in attempting to remain true to his mother's religious principles.⁴⁵

Mothers, not fathers, were urged to supervise the sexual education of sons. Mothers, the Society argued, spent most time with their children; fathers were usually occupied with business concerns and found little time for their children. Sons were naturally close to their mothers and devoted maternal supervision would cement these natural ties. A mother devoted to the moral reform cause could be trusted to teach her son to reject the traditional ethos of masculinity and accept the higher—more feminine—code of Christianity. A son thus educated would be inevitably a recruit in the women's crusade against sexual license.⁴⁶

The Society's general program of exposure and ostracism, lobbying and education depended for effectiveness upon the creation of a national association of militant and pious women. In the fall of 1834, but a few months after they had organized their Society, its New York officers began to create such a woman's organization. At first they worked through the *Advocate* and the small network of sympathizers John McDowall's efforts had created. By the spring of 1835, however, they were able to hire a minister to travel through western New York State "in behalf of Moral Reform causes."⁴⁷ The following year the committee sent two female missionaries, the editor of the Society's newspaper and a paid female agent, on a thousand-mile tour of the New England states. Visiting women's groups and churches in Brattleboro, Deerfield, Northampton, Pittsfield, the Stockbridges and many other towns, the ladies rallied their sisters to the moral reform cause and helped organize some forty-one new auxiliaries. Each succeeding summer saw similar trips by paid agents and managers of the Society throughout New York State and New England.⁴⁸ By 1839, the New York Female Moral Reform Society

⁴⁵*Advocate*, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1835), 5-6.

⁴⁶An editorial in the *Advocate* typified the Society's emphasis on the importance of child rearing and religious education as an exclusively maternal role. "To a mother.—You have a child on your knee. . . . It is an immortal being; destined to live forever! . . . And who is to make it happy or miserable? You—the mother! You who gave it birth, the mother of its body, . . . its destiny is placed in your hands" (*Advocate*, 10 [Jan. 1, 1844], 8).

⁴⁷N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, June 25, 1835."

⁴⁸N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, Oct. 4, 1836, and May 22, 1837, and Sept. 11, 1839." Indeed, as early as 1833 a substantial portion of John McDowall's support seemed to come from rural areas. See, for example, *McDowall's Journal*, 1 (Aug. 1833), 59-62.

boasted some 445 female auxiliaries, principally in greater New England.⁴⁹ So successful were these efforts that within a few years the bulk of the Society's membership and financial support came from its auxiliaries. In February 1838, the executive committee voted to invite representatives of these auxiliaries to attend the Society's annual meeting. The following year the New York Society voted at its annual convention to reorganize as a national society—the American Female Moral Reform Society; the New York group would be simply one of its many constituent societies.⁵⁰

This rural support was an indispensable part of the moral reform movement. The local auxiliaries held regular meetings in churches, persuaded hesitant ministers to preach on the Seventh Commandment, urged Sunday school teachers to confront this embarrassing but vital question. They raised money for the executive committee's ambitious projects, convinced at least some men to form male moral reform societies, and did their utmost to ostracize suspected lechers. When the American Female Moral Reform Society decided to mount a campaign to induce the New York State legislature to pass a law making seduction a criminal offense, the Society's hundreds of rural auxiliaries wrote regularly to their legislators, circulated petitions and joined their New York City sisters in Albany to lobby for the bill (which was finally passed in 1848).⁵¹

In addition to such financial and practical aid, members of the moral reform society's rural branches contributed another crucial, if less tangible, element to the reform movement. This was their commitment to the creation of a feeling of sisterhood among all morally dedicated women. Letters from individuals to the *Advocate* and reports from auxiliaries make clear, sometimes even in the most explicit terms, that many American women experienced a depressing sense of isolation. In part, this feeling merely reflected a physical reality for women living in rural communities. But since city- and town-dwelling women voiced similar complaints, I would like to suggest that this consciousness of isolation also reflected a sense of status inferiority. Confined by their non-maleness, antebellum American women lived within the concentric structure of a family organized around the needs and status of husbands or fathers. And such social isolation within the family—or perhaps more accurately a lack of autonomy both embodied in and symbolized by such isolation—not only dramatized,

⁴⁹N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, Oct. 4, 1838"; Northrup, *Record*, p. 22.

⁵⁰N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, May 10, 1839"; N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Quarterly Meeting, July, 1839." Power within the new national organization was divided so that the president and the board of managers were members of the N.Y.F.M.R.S. while the vice presidents were chosen from the rural auxiliaries. The annual meeting was held in New York City, the quarterly meetings in one of the towns of Greater New England.

⁵¹Virtually every issue of the *Advocate* is filled with letters and reports from the auxiliaries discussing their many activities.

but partially constituted, a differentiation in status.⁵² The fact that social values and attitudes were established by men and oriented to male experiences only exacerbated women's feelings of inferiority and irrelevance. Again and again the Society's members were to express their desire for a feminine-sororial community which might help break down this isolation, lighten the monotony and harshness of life, and establish a counter-system of female values and priorities.

The New York Female Moral Reform Society quite consciously sought to inspire in its members a sense of solidarity in a cause peculiar to their sex, and demanding total commitment, to give them a sense of worthiness and autonomy outside woman's traditionally confining role. Its members, their officers forcefully declared, formed a united phalanx twenty thousand strong, "A UNION OF SENTIMENT AND EFFORT AMONG . . . VIRTUOUS FEMALES FROM MAINE TO ALABAMA."⁵³ The officers of the New York Society were particularly conscious of the emotional importance of female solidarity within their movement—and the significant role that they as leaders played in the lives of their rural supporters. "Thousands are looking to us," the executive committee recorded in their minutes with mingled pride and responsibility, "with the expectation that the principles we have adopted, and the example we have set before the world will continue to be held up & they reasonably expect to witness our *united onward* movements till the conflict shall end in Victory."⁵⁴

For many of the Society's scattered members, the moral reform cause was their only contact with the world outside farm or village—the *Advocate* perhaps the only newspaper received by the family.⁵⁵ A sense of solidarity and of emotional affiliation permeated the correspondence between

⁵²The view that many women held of their role is perhaps captured in the remarks of an editorialist in the *Advocate* in 1850. Motherhood was unquestionably the most correct and important role for women. But it was a very hard role. "In their [mothers'] daily rounds of duty they may move in a retired sphere—secluded from public observation, oppressed with many cares and toils, and sometimes tempted to view their position as being adverse to the highest usefulness. The youthful group around them tax their energies to the utmost limit—the wants of each and all . . . must be watched with sleepless vigilance; improvement is perhaps less marked and rapid than is ardently desired. . . . Patience is tried, faith called into exercise; and all the graces of the Spirit demanded, to maintain equanimity and exhibit a right example. And *such* with all its weight of care and responsibility is the post at which God in his providence has placed the mothers of our land." The ultimate reward of motherhood which the writer held out to her readers, significantly, was that they would be the ones to shape the character of their children. *Advocate and Guardian*, 16 (Jan. 15, 1850), 13.

⁵³N.Y.F.M.R.S., *Guardian*, p. 8.

⁵⁴N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, Oct. 24, 1836."

⁵⁵See two letters, for example, to the *Advocate* from rural subscribers. Although written fifteen years apart and from quite different geographic areas (the first from Hartford, Conn., the second from Jefferson, Ill.), the sentiments expressed are remarkably similar. Letter in *Advocate*, 1 (Apr. 1835), 19; *Advocate and Guardian*, 16 (Jan. 15, 1850), 14.

rural members and the executive committee. Letters and even official reports inevitably began with the salutation, "Sisters," "Dear Sisters" or "Beloved Sisters." Almost every letter and report expressed the deep affection Society members felt for their like-thinking sisters in the cause of moral reform—even if their contact came only through letters and the *Advocate*. "I now pray and will not cease to pray," a woman in Syracuse, New York, wrote, "that your hearts may be encouraged and your hands strengthened."⁵⁶ Letters to the Society's executive committee often promised unfailing loyalty and friendship; members and leaders pledged themselves ever ready to aid either local societies or an individual sister in need.⁵⁷ Many letters from geographically isolated women reported that the Society made it possible for them for the first time to communicate with like-minded women. A few, in agitated terms, wrote about painful experiences with the double standard which only their correspondence with the *Advocate* allowed them to express and share.⁵⁸

Most significantly, the letters expressed a new consciousness of power. The moral reform society was based on the assertion of female moral superiority and the right and ability of women to reshape male behavior.⁵⁹ No longer did women have to remain passive and isolated within the structuring presence of husband or father. The moral reform movement was, perhaps for the first time, a movement within which women could forge a sense of their own identity.

And its founders had no intention of relinquishing their new-found feeling of solidarity and autonomy. A few years after the Society was founded, for example, a group of male evangelicals established a Seventh Commandment Society. They promptly wrote to the Female Moral Reform Society suggesting helpfully that since men had organized, the ladies could now disband; moral reform was clearly an area of questionable propriety. The New York executive committee responded quickly, firmly—and nega-

⁵⁶Letter in *Advocate*, 4 (Jan. 1, 1838), 6.

⁵⁷Letters and reports from rural supporters expressing such sentiments dotted every issue of the *Advocate* from its founding until the mid-1850s.

⁵⁸The editors of the *Advocate* not infrequently received (and printed) letters from rural subscribers reporting painfully how some young woman in their family had suffered social censure and ostracism because of the machinations of some lecher—who emerged from the affair with his respectability unblemished. This letter to the *Advocate* was the first time they could express the anguish and anger they felt. For one particularly pertinent example see an anonymous letter to the *Advocate*, 1 (Mar. 1835), 15–16.

⁵⁹N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, Oct. 4, 1836"; *Advocate*, 1 (Apr. 1835), 19–20; *Advocate*, 3 (Jan. 15, 1837), 194; *Advocate*, 4 (Jan. 1, 1838), 5, 7–8; *Advocate*, 4 (Apr. 1838), 6–7. An integral part of this expression of power was the women's insistence that they had the right to investigate male sexual practices and norms. No longer would they permit men to tell them that particular questions were improper for women's consideration. See for example, N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Circular to the Women of the United States," rpr. in *Advocate*, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1835), 6–7, 4.

tively. Women throughout America, they wrote, had placed their trust in a female moral reform society and in female officers. Women, they informed the men, believed in both their own right and ability to combat the problem; it was decidedly a woman's, not a man's issue.⁶⁰ "The paper is now in the right hands," one rural subscriber wrote: "This is the appropriate work for *women*. . . . Go on Ladies, go on, in the strength of the Lord."⁶¹

In some ways, indeed, the New York Female Moral Reform Society could be considered a militant woman's organization. Although it was not overtly part of the woman's rights movement, it did concern itself with a number of feminist issues, especially those relating to woman's economic role. Society, the *Advocate's* editors argued, had unjustly confined women to domestic tasks. There were many jobs in society that women could and should be trained to fill. They could perform any light indoor work as well as men. In such positions—as clerks and artisans—they would receive decent wages and consequent self-respect.⁶² And this economic emphasis was no arbitrary or inappropriate one, the Society contended. Thousands of women simply had to work; widows, orphaned young women, wives and mothers whose husbands could not work because of illness or intemperance had to support themselves and their children. Unfortunately, they had now to exercise these responsibilities on the pathetically inadequate salaries they received as domestics, washerwomen or seamstresses—crowded, underpaid and physically unpleasant occupations.⁶³ By the end of the 1840s, the Society had adopted the cause of the working woman and made it one of their principal concerns—in the 1850s even urging women to join unions and, when mechanization came to the garment industry, helping underpaid seamstresses rent sewing machines at low rates.⁶⁴

The Society sought consciously, moreover, to demonstrate woman's ability to perform successfully in fields traditionally reserved for men. Quite early in their history they adopted the policy of hiring only women em-

⁶⁰N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, June 28, 1837."

⁶¹Letter in *Advocate*, 1 (Apr. 1835), 19.

⁶²*Advocate and Guardian*, 16 (Jan. 15, 1850), 9.

⁶³*Advocate*, 1 (May 1835), 38; N.Y.F.M.R.S., *Guardian*, pp. 5–6. The Society initially became concerned with the problems of the city's poor and working women as a result of efforts to attack some of the economic causes of prostitution. The Society feared that the low wages paid seamstresses, domestics or washerwomen (New York's three traditional female occupations) might force otherwise moral women to turn to prostitution. The Society was, for example, among the earliest critics of the low wages and bad working conditions of New York's garment industry.

⁶⁴Significantly, the Society's editors and officers placed the responsibility for the low wages paid seamstresses and other female workers on ruthless and exploitative men. Much the same tone of anti-male hostility is evident in their economic exposés as in their sexual exposés.

ployees. From the first, of course, only women had been officers and managers of the Society. And after a few years, these officers began to hire women in preference to men as agents and to urge other charitable societies and government agencies to do likewise. (They did this although the only salaried charitable positions held by women in this period tended to be those of teachers in girls' schools or supervisors of women's wings in hospitals and homes for juvenile delinquents.) In February 1835, for instance, the executive committee hired a woman agent to solicit subscriptions to the *Advocate*. That summer they hired another woman to travel through New England and New York State organizing auxiliaries and giving speeches to women on moral reform. In October of 1836, the executive officers appointed two women as editors of their journal—undoubtedly among the first of their sex in this country to hold such positions.⁶⁵ In 1841, the executive committee decided to replace their male financial agent with a woman bookkeeper. By 1843 women even set type and did the folding for the Society's journal. All these jobs, the ladies proudly, indeed aggressively stressed, were appropriate tasks for women.⁶⁶

The broad feminist implications of such statements and actions must have been apparent to the officers of the New York Society. And indeed the Society's executive committee maintained discreet but active ties with the broader woman's rights movement of the 1830s, 40's and 50s; at one point at least, they flirted with official endorsement of a bold woman's rights position. Evidence of this flirtation can be seen in the minutes of the executive committee and occasionally came to light in articles and editorials appearing in the *Advocate*. As early as the mid-1830s, for instance, the executive committee began to correspond with a number of women who were then or were later to become active in the woman's rights movement. Lucretia Mott, abolitionist and pioneer feminist, was a founder and secretary of the Philadelphia Female Moral Reform Society; as such she was in frequent communication with the New York executive committee.⁶⁷ Emma Willard, a militant advocate of women's education and

⁶⁵N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, Feb. 20, 1835, Oct. 4 and Oct. 5, 1836"; N.Y.F.M.R.S., *Fifth Annual Report*, p. 5.

⁶⁶A.F.G.S., *Eleventh Annual Report*, pp. 5–6. For details of replacing male employees with women and the bitterness of the male reactions, see N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes," *passim*, for early 1843. Nevertheless, even these aggressively feminist women did not feel that women could with propriety chair public meetings, even those of their own Society. In 1838, for instance, when the ladies discovered that men expected to attend their annual meeting, they felt that they had to ask men to chair the meeting and read the women's reports. Their decision was made just after the Grimké sisters had created a storm of controversy by speaking at large mixed gatherings of men and women. Northrup, *Record*, pp. 21–25. For the experiences of the Grimké sisters with this same problem, see Gerda Lerner's excellent biography, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), chaps. 11–14.

⁶⁷N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, Aug. 3, 1837."

founder of the Troy Female Seminary, was another of the executive committee's regular correspondents. Significantly, when Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman doctor in either the United States or Great Britain, received her medical degree, Emma Willard wrote to the New York executive committee asking its members to use their influence to find her a job.⁶⁸ The Society did more than that. The *Advocate* featured a story dramatizing Dr. Blackwell's struggles. The door was now open for other women, the editors urged; medicine was a peculiarly appropriate profession for sensitive and sympathetic womankind. The Society offered to help interested women in securing admission to medical school.⁶⁹

One of the most controversial aspects of the early woman's rights movement was its criticism of the subservient role of women within the American family, and of the American man's imperious and domineering behavior toward women. Much of the Society's rhetorical onslaught upon the male's lack of sexual accountability served as a screen for a more general—and less socially acceptable—resentment of masculine social preeminence. Occasionally, however, the *Advocate* expressed such resentment overtly. An editorial in 1838, for example, revealed a deeply felt antagonism toward the power asserted by husbands over their wives and children. "A portion of the inhabitants of this favored land," the Society admonished, "are groaning under a despotism, which seems to be modeled precisely after that of the Autocrat of Russia. . . . We allude to the tyranny exercised in the HOME department, where lordly man, 'clothed with a little brief authority,' rules his trembling subjects with a rod of iron, conscious of entire impunity, and exalting in his fancied superiority." The Society's editorialist continued, perhaps even more bitterly: "Instead of regarding his wife as a help-mate for him, an equal sharer in his joys and sorrows, he looks upon her as a useful article of furniture, which is valuable only for the benefit derived from it, but which may be thrown aside at pleasure."⁷⁰ Such behavior, the editorial carefully emphasized, was not only commonplace, experienced by many of the Society's own members—even the wives of "Christians" and of ministers—but was accepted and even justified by society; was it not sanctioned by the Bible?

At about the same time, indeed, the editors of the *Advocate* went so far as to print an attack upon "masculine" translations and interpretations of the Bible, and especially of Paul's epistles. This appeared in a lengthy article written by Sarah Grimké, a "notorious" feminist and abolitionist.⁷¹

⁶⁸N.Y.F.M.R.S., "Executive Committee Minutes, June 2, 1847, Mar. 28, 1849." The *Advocate* regularly reviewed her books, and indeed made a point of reviewing books by women authors.

⁶⁹*Advocate and Guardian*, 16 (Jan. 15, 1850), 10.

⁷⁰*Advocate*, 4 (Feb. 15, 1838), 28.

⁷¹See Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters*.

The executive committee clearly sought to associate their organization more closely with the nascent woman's rights movement. Calling upon American women to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, Sarah Grimké asserted that God had created woman the absolute equal of man. But throughout history, man, being stronger, had usurped woman's natural rights. He had subjected wives and daughters to his physical control and had evolved religious and scientific rationalizations to justify this domination. "Men have endeavored to entice, or to drive women from almost every sphere of moral action." Miss Grimké charged: " 'Go home and spin' is the . . . advice of the domestic tyrant. . . . The first duty, I believe, which devolves on our sex now is to think for themselves. . . . Until we take our stand side by side with our brother; until we read all the precepts of the Bible as addressed to woman as well as to man, and lose . . . the consciousness of sex, we shall never fulfil the end of our existence." "Those who do undertake to labor," Miss Grimké wrote from her own and her sister's bitter experiences, "are the scorn and ridicule of their own and the other sex." "We are so little accustomed to *think for ourselves*," she continued,

that we submit to the dictum of prejudice, and of usurped authority, almost without an effort to redeem ourselves from the unhallowed shackles which have so long bound us; almost without a desire to rise from that degradation and bondage to which we have been consigned by man, and by which the faculties of our minds, and the powers of our spiritual nature, have been prevented from expanding to their full growth, and are sometimes wholly crushed.

Each woman must re-evaluate her role in society; no longer could she depend on husband or father to assume her responsibilities as a free individual. No longer, Sarah Grimké argued, could she be satisfied with simply caring for her family or setting a handsome table.⁷² The officers of the Society, in an editorial comment following this article, admitted that she had written a radical critique of woman's traditional role. But they urged their members, "It is of immense importance to our sex to possess clear and *correct* ideas of our rights and duties."⁷³

Sarah Grimké's overt criticism of woman's traditional role, containing as it did an attack upon the Protestant ministry and orthodox interpretations of the Bible, went far beyond the consensus of the *Advocate's* rural subscribers. The following issue contained several letters sharply critical of her and of the managers, for printing her editorial.⁷⁴ And indeed the *Advocate* never again published the work of an overt feminist. Their mem-

⁷²*Advocate*, 4 (Jan. 1, 1838), 3-5.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷⁴See, for example, *Advocate*, 4 (Apr. 1, 1838), 55; 4 (July 16, 1838), 108.

bership, the officers concluded, would not tolerate explicit attacks upon traditional family structure and orthodox Christianity. Anti-male resentment and anger had to be expressed covertly. It was perhaps too threatening or—realistically—too dangerous for respectable matrons in relatively close-knit semi-rural communities in New York, New England, Ohio or Wisconsin so openly to question the traditional relations of the sexes and demand a new and ominously forceful role for women.

The compromise the membership and the officers of the Society seemed to find most comfortable was one that kept the American woman within the home—but which greatly expanded her powers as pious wife and mother. In rejecting Sarah Grimké's feminist manifesto, the Society's members implicitly agreed to accept the role traditionally assigned woman: the self-sacrificing, supportive, determinedly chaste wife and mother who limited her "sphere" to domesticity and religion. But in these areas her power should be paramount. The mother, not the father, should have final control of the home and family—especially of the religious and moral education of her children. If the world of economics and public affairs was his, the home must be hers.⁷⁵

And even outside the home, woman's peculiar moral endowment and responsibilities justified her in playing an increasingly expansive role, one which might well ultimately impair aspects of man's traditional autonomy. When man transgressed God's commandments, through licentiousness, religious apathy, the defense of slavery, or the sin of intemperance—woman had both the right and duty of leaving the confines of the home and working to purify the male world.

The membership of the New York Female Moral Reform Society chose not to openly espouse the woman's rights movement. Yet many interesting emotional parallels remain to link the moral reform crusade and the suffrage movement of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the Grimké sisters and Susan B. Anthony. In its own way, indeed, the war for purification of sexual mores was far more fundamental in its implications for woman's traditional role than the demand for woman's education—or even the vote.

Many of the needs and attitudes, moreover, expressed by suffragette leaders at the Seneca Falls Convention and in their efforts in the generation following are found decades earlier in the letters of rural women in the *Advocate of Moral Reform*. Both groups found woman's traditionally passive role intolerable. Both wished to assert female worth and values in a heretofore entirely male world. Both welcomed the creation of a sense of feminine loyalty and sisterhood that could give emotional strength and

⁷⁵For examples of the glorification of the maternal role see *Advocate*, 10 (Mar. 15, 1844), 47 and *Advocate and Guardian*, 16 (Jan. 15, 1850), 13–14.

comfort to women isolated within their homes—whether in a remote farmstead or a Gramercy Park mansion. And it can hardly be assumed that the demand for votes for women was appreciably more radical than a moral absolutism which encouraged women to invade bordellos, befriend harlots and publicly discuss rape, seduction and prostitution.

It is important as well to re-emphasize a more general historical perspective. When the pious women founders of the Moral Reform Society gathered at the Third Free Presbyterian Church, it was fourteen years before the Seneca Falls Convention—which has traditionally been accepted as the beginning of the woman's rights movement in the United States. There simply was no woman's movement in the 1830s. The future leaders were either still adolescents or just becoming dissatisfied with aspects of their role. Women advocates of moral reform were among the very first American women to challenge their completely passive, home-oriented image. They were among the first to travel throughout the country without male chaperones. They published, financed, even set type for their own paper and defied a bitter and long-standing male opposition to their cause. They began, in short, to create a broader, less constricted sense of female identity. Naturally enough, they were dependent upon the activist impulse and legitimating imperatives of evangelical religion. This was indeed a complex symbiosis, the energies of pietism and the grievances of role discontent creating the new and activist female consciousness which characterized the history of the American Female Moral Reform Society in antebellum America. Their experience, moreover, was probably shared, though less overtly, by the thousands of women who devoted time and money to the great number of reform causes which multiplied in Jacksonian America. Women in the abolition and the temperance movements (and to a less extent in more narrowly evangelical and religious causes) also developed a sense of their ability to judge for themselves and of their right to publicly criticize the values of the larger society. The lives and self-image of all these women had changed—if only so little—because of their new reforming interests.

